# FREEDOM AND TERROR IN THE DONBAS

## A Ukrainian-Russian Borderland, 1870s–1990s

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# Introduction

RUSSIA IS A BIG COUNTRY. So is Ukraine, at least by European standards. This book is about the Donbas, or Donets Basin, a relatively small area (somewhat smaller than the state of Indiana but much larger than Massachusetts) that straddles Ukraine and Russia. Small though it may be, the Donbas, located far from the political metropolis of Moscow or Kiev, has always remained a political problem for the power center. When I was writing a book on Stalin's industrial revolution in the mid-1980s, I came to recognize the importance of this coal mining and metallurgical center, Russia's (and Ukraine's) Ruhr and the problem child of Moscow and Kiev. In 1988, after the book was published,[1] I decided to write a monograph on the tumultuous history of the Donbas.

In the meantime, several books dealing with the Donbas (up to 1924) were published in English.[2] I have benefited from these publications, particularly that of Charters Wynn. I challenge some of their conclusions and assumptions, but my primary concern in this book is with political terror in the period not covered by my predecessors, namely, the Stalin era. I place my discussion within a much larger chronological context, from the Cossack era to the 1990s, in order to emphasize the central theme of this book: throughout its history the Donbas has embodied freedom and it was this freedom that defined the extraordinarily brutal and violent political history of the Donbas.

Speaking of freedom in the autocratic Russian Empire or Stalin's Soviet Union may seem to be a contradiction in terms. In fact, this book shows that

[1] Hiroaki Kuromiya, *Stalin's Industrial Revolution: Politics and Workers, 1928–1932* (Cambridge University Press, 1988).

[2] Theodore H. Friedgut, *Iuzovka and Revolution*, vol. 1, *Life and Work in Russia's Donbass, 1869–1924*, and vol. 2, *Politics and Revolution in Russia's Donbass, 1869–1924* (Princeton University Press, 1989–94); Charters Wynn, *Workers, Strikes, and Pogroms: The Donbas-Dnepr Bend in Late Imperial Russia, 1870–1905* (Princeton University Press, 1992); and Susan P. McCaffray, *The Politics of Industrialization in Tsarist Russia: The Association of Southern Coal and Steel Producers, 1874–1914* (Northern Illinois University Press, 1996). Also note a book on the contemporary Donbas: Lewis H. Siegelbaum and Daniel J. Walkowitz, *Workers of the Donbas Speak: Survival and Identity in the New Ukraine, 1989–1992* (State University of New York Press, 1995).

while political violence was part and parcel of the history of the Donbas, paradoxically, the Donbas, the steppe land once controlled by Cossacks, symbolized freedom both in the popular imagination and in the perception of Moscow (or Kiev). I use the term freedom in its "negative" sense, namely, "freedom from" and not "freedom to."[3] With its highly developed underground (both literal and symbolic), the Donbas collieries served as a refuge for freedom seekers. This does not mean that no economic exploitation or ethnic conflict existed in the Donbas. On the contrary, attracted by the freedom and opportunities this frontier region provided, all sorts of people came to settle there from all parts of the country and beyond, and harsh economic exploitation and brutal ethnic conflict were part of the everyday life of the Donbas. In this sense, the Donbas may be somewhat analogous to Siberia, the American West, or even medieval European cities.

What is remarkable about the Donbas is that even at the height of Stalinism it continued to maintain some elements of the free steppe,[4] providing refuge to the disenfranchised, to outcasts, fugitives, criminals, and others. So important were some of these people to the operation of Donbas industry that when the politically suspect were being expelled from the cities and towns of the Donbas and the rest of the country, they were allowed to continue to work in the Donbas mines. When war and other cataclysmic events produced a large number of helpless people, they were either wooed to the Donbas by Moscow or dumped there as undesirable and dangerous elements. Consequently, the Donbas was politically suspect from the point of view of Moscow. When Stalin decided to eradicate his political enemies (real and potential), the Donbas inevitably became a target for extensive terror. Indeed, there is some evidence that the Donbas was among the areas in the country hardest hit by Stalin's Great Terror.

It is not that the Donbas was wholly unique in maintaining a degree of freedom and therefore in being terrorized by the state. The present book is a

[3]For the positive and negative concepts of freedom and their political implications, see Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford University Press, 1969). As Berlin explains, while negative freedom (or liberty) was and can be used to legitimate the status quo of, say, despotism and poverty, it was the positive conception of freedom that, historically speaking, tended to be "inflated into some super-personal entity – a state, a class, a nation, or the march of history itself" (p. 134). As the present book demonstrates, the Donbas indeed rejected "class," "nation," and "the march of history" for much of its history, and that was why it remained Moscow's or Kiev's problem child.

[4]The steppe and freedom were inexorably associated in the minds of Ukrainians, Russians, and other residents of the empire. Note, for example, N. Gogol's description of the "limitless, free [*vol'naia*], beautiful steppe." N. V. Gogol', *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 2 (Moscow, 1937), p. 60. I owe this citation to Judith Deutsch Kornblatt, *The Cossack Hero in Russian Literature: A Study in Cultural Mythology* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), p. 54. Note also Mykola Cherniavs'kyi's "free sons of the steppe" [*Vil'nykh stepu syniv*] and Khrystia Alchevs'ka's "embraces of the free steppe" [*V obiimakh voli steppovoi*], in Vadym Olifirenko, *Duma i pisnia. Dzherela literaturnoho kraieznavstva* (Donets'k, 1993), pp. 125 and 177. The Donbas folklore abounded with the same kinds of notions. See Vira Bilets'ka, "Shakhtarski pisni," *Etnohrafichnyi visnyk*, no. 5 (1927).

case study, and it will require many more detailed case studies of cities and various regions of the Russian Empire or Soviet Union to place the Donbas in proper comparative perspective. The cities, particularly Moscow, St. Petersburg (Leningrad), Kiev, and Kharkiv, also provided a degree of anonymity to their residents, but residency in the capitals and other major cities was tightly controlled by the police during the Soviet period. So, as a rule, it was far more difficult and hence much less attractive for people who wanted anonymity to live in these cities than in the Donbas. Siberia, which also symbolized freedom, may have been as attractive as the Donbas in this respect, but Siberia embodied hell as much as heaven.[5] Even though Siberia had attracted many settlers (including Ukrainians) before the revolution, after the revolution it became more a symbol of exile, convict labor, and death, particularly for Ukrainians who preferred to try their luck in the more proximate Donbas.[6]

Nor was political terror the monopoly of the Donbas. Violence was no stranger in Russian or Ukrainian history. It is evident that the whole nation, all cities and all villages, suffered from terror under Stalin. It would be inappropriate to overemphasize terror in the Donbas. The fact that the Donbas coal-mining industry and quite a few of its workers were critically important to the country's economy (and hence to its military) mitigated Stalin's terror in all likelihood. Nevertheless, the terror of the 1930s in the Donbas was extraordinary, and violence was an integral part of political life in the Donbas both theretofore and thereafter. In other words, the present monograph maintains that the Donbas was an extreme example of the contention between freedom and terror and that an extreme case can be extremely revealing.

Throughout its history, the Donbas has been politically unmanageable. Forces from the political metropolises have tried to capture the hearts and minds of the Donbas only to get burned. This has been most clearly demonstrated at times of crisis such as the revolution and civil war period, the World War II years, and at the collapse of the Soviet Union. For example, unlike the neighboring Don, which articulated political ideas in 1917 (such as "Cossack republicanism" and "Soviet republicanism"),[7] the Donbas rejected all political groups. The political atmosphere of the Donbas appeared noxious and dangerous to all parties concerned. It was Leon Trotsky, Stalin's archenemy,

[5]Galya Diment and Yuri Slezkine, eds., *Between Heaven and Hell: The Myth of Siberia in Russian Culture* (New York, 1993).

[6]Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (University of California Press, 1995), presents a more heavenly picture of the Russian East (despite a hellish climate and all the horrors of everyday life), but for Ukrainians, particularly the dekulakized, the Donbas was a temporary refuge from which one day they hoped to return to their native villages, whereas Siberia was too distant and too horrible for them to entertain hopes of one day reclaiming their homelands.

[7]Peter I. Holquist, "A Russian Vendee: The Practice of Revolutionary Politics in the Don Countryside, 1917–1921" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1995).

who best described the political history of the Donbas: "One can't go to the Donbas without a [political] gas mask."[8]

This book belongs to the genre of *kraieznavstvo* (*kraevedenie*), or regional studies. In focusing my study on one region in Ukraine and Russia, I have benefited particularly from the concept of "exit" (as opposed to "loyalty" and "voice") in Albert O. Hirschman's work.[9] It is my contention that the Donbas has always functioned as an "exit," or refuge, an alternative to political conformity or protest. Various analyses of frontiers and borders[10] and historical geography[11] have also been very useful in constructing my own ideas, even if many of the works are concerned with national identities whereas the Donbas case shows how little they mattered.

In both a geographical and symbolic sense, the Donbas constitutes a particular community, just as a nation, city, or village does. It is a space, a frontier land, where inner yearnings for freedom, wild exploitation, and everyday violence have competed for dominance. Like other communities, the steppe, with all its freedom and terror, was an imagined community.[12] Like others, this imagined community enjoyed myths. The peculiarity of the Donbas was that however differently it may have been imagined by various groups of people, the Donbas lived up to its reputation of freedom and terror.

At one point in the course of working on this book, I wanted to write a microhistory,[13] something that would explore Soviet politics from a microscopic

[8]Quoted in *XI z'izd Komunistychnoi partii (bil'shovykiv) Ukrainy, 5–15 chervnia 1930 r. Sten. zvit* (Kharkiv, 1930), p. 373.

[9]Albert O. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States* (Harvard University Press, 1970).

[10]Peter Sahlins, *Boundaries: The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees* (University of California Press, 1989); William Cronin, George Miles, and Jay Gitlin, eds., *Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America's Western Past* (New York, 1992); Catherine Wendy Bracewell, *The Uskoks of Senj: Piracy, Banditry, and Holy War in the Sixteenth-Century Adriatic* (Cornell University Press, 1992); and Linda Colley, *The Significance of the Frontier in British History* (Austin, Texas, 1995). See also *Russian History / Histoire Russe*, 19:1–4 (1992), devoted to the frontiers in Russian history.

[11]Of particular interest are Mark Bassin, "Inventing Siberia: Visions of the Russian East in the Early Nineteenth Century," *American Historical Review*, 96:3 (June 1991), pp. 763–94, and "Turner, Solov'ev, and the 'Frontier Hypothesis': The Nationalist Significance of Open Spaces," *Journal of Modern History*, 65 (September 1993), pp. 413–511; and David Hooson, ed., *Geography and National Identity* (Oxford, 1994). Note also Patricia Yaeger, eds., *The Geography of Identity* (University of Michigan Press, 1996), particularly Pieter M. Judson, "Frontiers, Islands, Forests, Stones: Mapping the Geography of a German Identity in the Habsburg Monarchy, 1848–1900," pp. 382–406

[12]For an analysis of how a particular place, in this case, the Don (part of which belonged to the Donbas) in southern Russia was imagined, see Holquist, "A Russian Vendee."

[13]The most interesting recent work of this type on the Stalin era is Jochen Hellbeck, ed., *Tagebuch aus Moskau 1931–1939* (Munich, 1996). Note also Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy: A History of the Russian Revolution* (London, 1996), which combines both macro- and microperspectives.

point of view à la, for example, Robert Darnton, Natalie Zemon Davis, and Carlo Ginzburg. Such a history may become my next work, and the challenge of the so-called subjectivist school will have to be taken up,[14] but the sources I unearthed in Ukrainian and Russian archives pushed me instead toward an abstraction of the notion of "space," the "free steppe" in the case of the Donbas, almost a macrohistory as opposed to my earlier intent. The late Ernest Gellner's influence as well helped me to analyze the Donbas in macrohistorical terms, for example, in terms of nations and nationalism (or, to be more precise, nonnations and nonnationalism in this case).[15] Nevertheless, this book is still about the "ordinary," nameless "common" people in the Donbas (although I have tried to identify them wherever possible), and how their lives were affected by state terror.

Through abundant cases of individual lives, I demonstrate the complexity of the place and the period for the masses of the people involved. Because the main concern of the book is with the Donbas as a region, I can provide only snippets of individual lives. Nevertheless, the number of cases is overwhelming. As well as interviewing people in Ukraine and Russia, I have been able to unearth numerous stories in various libraries and newly opened archives in Donets'k, Luhans'k, Kiev, and Moscow. I have collected them ad nauseam. Tragedies, crushed lives, incidents of state as well as popular terror, heroism, villainy, cowardice, and gallantry are discussed here in great detail.

Of all the sources I have consulted, the formerly closed archives have been the most useful. Notably, "criminal" files of repressed individuals in the former security police archives in Donets'k and Luhans'k, Ukraine, are the source of many hitherto unknown stories on those repressed during the 1930s (Chapter 6) and in the war and postwar years, as well as on the Holocaust and war criminals in the Donbas (Chapter 7). I have been less successful in accessing archival sources on the more recent years, in part because of the official secrecy laws in Ukraine and Russia. Nevertheless, I have found considerable new information on the tumultuous lives of people in the Donbas (Chapter 8). All in all, these three chapters, along with Chapters 3 and 5 (on war, revolution, and civil war, and the 1932–33 famine, respectively) compose the core of this book.

To write about how "ordinary people" experienced terror is a formidable challenge. What terror meant to the people and how they felt, thought, and acted can not be answered without examining their world views. Yet one knows well, empirically, that belief and ideology determine action as much as they do not. To examine an era of rapid change and transformation, both

[14]Manfred Hildermeier organized a conference on this challenge in Munich in June 1996, "Stalinismus vor dem zweiten Weltkrieg."

[15]Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Cornell University Press, 1983), and *Encounters with Nationalism* (Oxford, 1994).

synchronic and diachronic analysis is needed. While historical sources, even hitherto secret archival documents, cannot tell the "truth" in and of themselves, historical documents and events cannot be treated merely as texts or semiotic fields.[16] Historical events took place under real material and human constraints. Such universal constraints as power, greed, fear, hope, and hunger have to be entered into the equation. Only then do the questions of how people lived in a historically specific context and how their perceptions changed become comprehensible.[17] I have tried to do this in the present book through the use both of detailed statistics when available and personal case histories.

In writing on terror in the Soviet Union, one must state categorically that political terror on a mass scale in the modern era is not unique to the Soviet Union. Adolf Hitler, Mao Tse-tung, Idi Amin, Pol Pot, to name just a few, perpetrated mass terror. This fact does not mitigate the monstrosity of the terror in the Soviet Union. However, its enormity has sometimes been downplayed for other reasons, for example, in recognition of Stalin's victory over Nazi Germany. A similar phenomenon might have occurred with regard to Germany had Hitler won the war, as Saul Friedlander posits in his criticism of Hayden White for the implications of White's epistemological relativism:

> For instance, what would have happened if the Nazis had won the war? No doubt there would have been a plethora of pastoral emplotments of life in the Third Reich and of comic emplotments of the disappearance of its victims, mainly the Jews. How, in this case, would White (who clearly rejects any revisionist version of the Holocaust) define an epistemological criterion for refuting a comic interpretation of these events, without using any reference to "political effectiveness"?[18]

This hypothetical case was a reality for the Soviet Union. Consequently the Soviet case is significantly more complex than it might otherwise have been. Stalin's terror was monstrous. Its operations were complex and extensive, writing about it is extremely painful, and its analysis is daunting for historians, but

[16]There is a vast literature on the subject. Note, however, Gabrielle M. Spiegel, "History, Historicism, and the Social Logic of the Text in the Middle Ages," *Speculum*, 65 (1995), pp. 59–86; a discussion ("History and Post-Modernism") in *Past and Present*, nos. 131 (May 1991), 133 (November 1991), and 135 (May 1992); and Ernest Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion* (London, 1992).

[17]For an interesting discussion of these issues of belief and action, see Marshall Sahlins, *Islands of History* (University of Chicago Press, 1985), and *How "Natives" Think: About Captain Cook, for Example* (University of Chicago Press, 1995); and Gananath Obeyesekere, *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook: European Mythmaking in the Pacific* (Princeton University Press, 1992).

[18]Saul Friedlander, "Introduction," in Friedlander, ed., *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution"* (Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 10. For White, see his *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 75, where he contends: "[W]hen it comes to apprehending the historical record, there are no grounds to be found in the historical record itself for preferring one way of constructing its meaning over another."

this book suggests that there is no denying Stalin's direct role in it.[19]

I am less interested in examining Stalin's culpability, however, than in analyzing the political mechanism of his terror.

The fundamental issue here is the construction of "enemy." The Donbas, in Moscow's imagination, was fraught with "enemies." Moscow's perception may well have been accurate, as the present book suggests. Yet political authorities lacked effective means by which to gauge the political mood of the population, notwithstanding the seemingly almighty secret police with its extensive surveillance network. This was because virtually all critical political thought was driven underground. From the 1932–33 famine crisis onward, in its efforts to eradicate the invisible, imagined "enemies," Moscow constructed a new image of enemy, the class-neutral "enemy of the people," instead of the "class enemy," which was constrained by Marxist ideology.

This new image was not simply imposed from above upon a politically passive population. The Donbas case demonstrates that people created their own images of enemies, using the official political discourse to suit their purposes.[20] People who had suffered oppression for generations seized on the concept of "enemy" as a focus for their frustration and anger. Traditional prejudices surfaced and received popular affirmation under a new label, the "enemy." Anti-Semitism is one disturbing example. Before World War II, the Soviet authorities had discouraged this prejudice of long standing, but it died hard in society. Such was the case, at least in the Donbas, where few Jews were among the mining population.

The problem was that the "enemy of the people" was so inclusive that it embraced the "people" themselves. The otherwise safest political option of passivity was not safe in the case of Stalin's Soviet Union, because the enemy hunt concerned precisely those hidden, invisible enemies who, in Stalin's imagination, feigned passivity. Thus, as if caught in a maelstrom, virtually everyone got involved in the terror in some capacity or another at some stage or another. The Donbas case demonstrates how blurred and confusing the concept of the "enemy of the people" became. Even though Moscow tightly controlled its terror against the "enemies of the people," the operations became so extensive as to be self-defeating.

There is no need to assume the impossibility (or difficulty) of "subjectivity," or the "private sphere," in Stalinist society, as some historians contend.[21]

[19]Note the uncritical and unsubstantiated contention by Robert W. Thurston, *Life and Terror in Stalin's Russia, 1934–1941* (Yale University Press, 1996), p. 227: "Stalin was not guilty of mass first-degree murder from 1934 to 1941."

[20]One form of this practice is denunciation. For a perceptive analysis of this in a European context, see Sheila Fitzpatrick and Robert Gellately, eds., *Accusatory Practices: Denunciation in Modern European History, 1789–1989* (University of Chicago Press, 1997).

[21]See, for example, Hellbeck, *Tagebuch*. Note also Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, and Igal Halfin and Jochen Hellbeck, "Rethinking the Stalinist Subject: Stephen Kotkin's 'Magnetic Mountain'

For one, as Manfred Hildermeier has argued, just as the "objective" world is not the whole world, so "the 'inner world' and 'self-consciousness' do not compose the whole world."[22] Indeed, one can safely assume that in a country like Stalin's Soviet Union, a complete break between an individual's thought and action was possible. This break explains why Stalin needed his own version of trials of conscience.[23] For another, much of the argument of the "subjectivist" school seems to assume implicitly or explicitly the immutability of the regime in discussing an individual's action (or practice). The regime was not at all immutable in parts of the Soviet Union: the war with Germany did away with Stalin's power in occupied territory. (This is a fact very often missed by studies focused on Moscow or St. Petersburg – hence the importance of regional studies.) The German occupation brought entirely new factors into politics. Even at the height of the Great Terror, individuals no doubt imagined political alternatives. It was patently clear both to the ruler and the ruled that war brings such alternatives. This indeed became the case for large areas of the Soviet Union, including the Donbas.

An apparent contradiction has always been inherent in both traditional and new approaches to the subject of Stalin's terror. In condemnation of Stalinist terror, historians implicitly assume that there was no serious political resistance to Stalin. At the same time, in support of Stalin's political foes, historians also assume that there actually was considerable resistance.[24] While the subjectivist interpretation allows for little or no room for dissent, historians who focus on dissent, resistance, and subversion tend to take too uncritically official archival documents full of fabricated information.[25] I contend that it would be more fruitful to conceptualize the "frontiers," for example, the free steppe and the

and the State of Soviet Historical Studies," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, 44:3 (1996), pp. 456–63.

[22]Manfred Hildermeier, "The Circular Flow of Theory: Some Interpretive Problems of Prewar Stalinism in the 1990s" (paper presented at the "Stalinismus vor dem zweiten Weltkrieg" conference, June 1996).

[23]For the best analysis of the similarity between the Inquisition and the Great Terror, see Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, pp. 336–38. However, Kotkin tends to minimize Stalin's terror by treating it as intraparty business.

[24]Note Conquest, *The Great Terror*, and Stephen F. Cohen, *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution: A Political Biography, 1888–1938* (New York, 1973).

[25]This tendency is blatant in many works by historians of the former Soviet Union. For more careful approaches, see Jeffrey J. Rossman, "The Teikovo Cotton Workers' Strike of April 1932: Class, Gender and Identity Politics in Stalin's Russia," *Russian Review*, 56 (January 1997); Sarah Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia: Terror, Propaganda and Dissent, 1934–1941* (Cambridge University Press, 1997); and Leslie A. Rimmel, "Another Kind of Fear: The Kirov Murder and the End of Bread Rationing in Leningrad," *Slavic Review*, 56:3 (Fall 1997). I have explored this problem in more detail in "How Do We Know What the People Thought under Stalin?" (paper prepared for the conference "The Stalin Period: New Ideas, New Conversations," University of California, Riverside, 12–15 March 1998).

minds of the people, which the powers that be could not fully control.[26] This case study suggests a new way of studying Stalin's terror.

[26]Note J. Arch Getty's important concept on center-local relations in his *Origins of the Great Purges: The Soviet Communist Party Reconsidered, 1933–1938* (Cambridge University Press, 1985).